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## *Preface*

The premise of this examination began as a question that many in the United States armed forces may also be asking. That is, if we as professionals in the trade of arms are required to take life in the defense of our country, yet must do so in accordance with the laws of warfare, why then do atrocities occur? Many conflicts have occurred throughout history, but foreign militaries continually astonish us with their conduct in war. This is not simply a question regarding death in combat, but rather an examination of the reasons behind excruciatingly brutal measures that involve rape, bodily mutilation, torture, and an utter disregard for human life, especially regarding noncombatants. El Salvador proved to be a good case study that might help answer that singular question.

My research initially included an insurrection in Peru. The observation I had was that the Peruvian military would routinely respond to an insurgent attack by going into a village and killing everyone. The government would later claim that the entire village was part of the insurgency as a means to boost their success. This simply did not make sense. Therefore, I hypothesized that when a government engages in counterinsurgency, it is more repressive (necessarily or not) than what American forces can do as an intervening force. The American public simply will not allow its own military to commit such atrocities. The My Lai massacre during the Vietnam conflict is a case in point.

I would like to extend special thanks to Dr. Pauletta Otis who guided me through this entire process. I would also like to thank Colonel Cherry and Drs. Bechtol, Jacobsen, Dinardo, and Swanson who, through their insight as faculty advisors, have directly influenced my thought process, my views regarding irregular warfare, and my values as a military officer.

## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** Violence in Counterinsurgency – The Case of El Salvador

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**Thesis:** El Salvador's civil war is a case where domestic government response took generally repressive measures to quell an insurrection, unlike the United States' preferred solution to counterinsurgency, and provides a good case study comparing the levels and types of violence used by insurgents, domestic government, and interventionist forces.

**Discussion:** The civil war in El Salvador (1980 – 1992) is a case where an estimated 75,000 people died during the conflict, most were non-combatants. While any war can create immense casualties, that the Salvadorans suffered at the hands of their own marks a departure from the expected actions of a military operating within its own country.

Several reasons for increased domestic repression in counterinsurgency arise. Prominent among these is the perceived social contract between the state and the people in which the insurgency constitutes a violation of the covenant formed in the state-versus-governed relationship. Barbarism, indiscriminate violence, and intimate violence permeate in a failed government such as was discovered in El Salvador's civil war. Finally, the Salvadoran government's lack of control over the military failed to curb massive non-combatant killings, which occurred mostly at the hands of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, not the insurgents.

The United States found itself in a conundrum of supporting the repressive government in the name of the Cold War, but faced allegations that it was supporting a regime known for its human rights abuses. Unlike its experience in Vietnam, the United States only resorted to diplomatic and economic measures as a means to curb the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front. Failing to enforce some fundamentals of counterinsurgency and allowing the Salvadoran military to operate unobserved contributed to prolonging both the wrongful violence and the insurgency.

**Conclusion:** The people of a country form the grassroots structure that supports both insurgents and government alike. While government response is crucial to determine the outcome in counterinsurgency, repressive measures against the population do nothing more than further the cause of an insurgency and leaves in its wake scars that may never heal.

## Introduction

*The enemies of the people act in a more or less intensely criminal fashion according to the specific social, historic, and economic circumstances of each place. There are places where the flight of a man into the guerrilla zone, leaving his family and his house, does not provoke any great reaction. There are other places where this is enough to provoke the burning or seizure of his belongings, and still others where the flight will bring death to all members of his family*<sup>1</sup>  
-Che Guevarra

From 1980 until 1992, the government of El Salvador engaged in a bloody civil war with the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* or the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The uprising initially began as a generalized protest against repressive policies by the state, but quickly turned violent when the state used forceful measures to quell anti-government activists. The insurgency experienced in El Salvador was one, described by Bard O'Neill in his book *Insurgency & Terrorism*, which sought to overthrow an existing political system "based on the ultimate value of distributional equality and centrally controlled structures."<sup>2</sup>

This period in El Salvador's history resulted in horrific human rights violations, violations of the laws of warfare established by the Geneva Conventions, and an utter disregard for the people of a relatively small country amidst the power struggle of the Cold War. El Salvador's civil war is a case where domestic government response took generally repressive measures to quell an insurrection, unlike the United States' preferred solution to counterinsurgency (COIN) and provides a good case study comparing the levels and types of violence used by insurgents, domestic government, and interventionist forces.

Violence is a facet of all warfare to a greater or lesser degree. Insurgency warfare is no exception. While Clausewitz claims that, "an insurrection is simply another means of war...,"<sup>3</sup> barbaric, indiscriminate, and cruel behavior characterizes many insurgencies. To the extent that



established laws of warfare are disregarded, that torture becomes an accepted method of interrogation or pleasure, and that terrorism becomes a conventional practice, insurgency warfare typifies the worst in human behavior and highlights the most controversial aspect of this enterprise called "war." Insurgencies challenge not only the legitimacy of a government, thereby violating a perceived covenant formed between the people and the state;<sup>4</sup> they threaten, if not the very existence of the state, then certainly its leadership. Government response is crucial to countering insurgent objectives and to determine the success or outcome of the effort.<sup>5</sup>

The intent of this paper is to examine El Salvador during the period 1980 to 1992 to understand why this particular government was more repressive compared to an American interventionist approach. Topics for analysis include the notion of physical-protection as the basis for society, logic in violence, and the construct of the Salvadoran government and its control of the military instrument of national power. Additionally, United States' involvement differed considerably in view of its strategic concerns vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The conclusion provides evidence from America's experience in El Salvador for current and future American military operations, which involve the whole of U.S. government, as added understanding regarding the nature of foreign insurgencies.

### **Crisis in El Salvador**

The civil war in El Salvador was preceded by fifty years of authoritarian rule where a relatively few wealthy individuals owned most of the land in El Salvador, and the majority populace were destitute land workers, peasants subservient to the authoritarian government and the military which protected the oligarchy.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the successful Sandinista revolution in neighboring Nicaragua where Marxist revolutionaries ousted the oppressive Somoza regime in

1979, fear that communist ideals spreading throughout Central America would threaten the prevailing power structure precipitated a crackdown by the military.<sup>7</sup>

“The catalyst that ignited the violence in El Salvador was the military coup of October 1979 that ousted Romero as the last protector of the interests of the oligarchy.”<sup>8</sup> The end of General Carlos Humberto Romero’s rule, a link between the ruling families and the military, brought about actions to suppress a growing insurgency instigated by the FMLN. Named after Farabundo Martí, the communist who had fought with Sandino in Nicaragua in the 1920s and who had then been executed following the failure of a communist revolt in El Salvador in 1932, the FMLN initiated a popular uprising comprised of Salvadoran peasants and an emerging middle class.<sup>9</sup>

Following Romero’s ouster, the group of elite Salvadoran property owners “felt it could no longer rely entirely on the armed forces for protection and sought to broaden its base of support by the formation in 1981 of a new political organization, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista; Arena), led by retired major Roberto D’Aubuisson Arrieta.”<sup>10</sup> This alliance was instrumental in funding death squads and mass murder as an effort to suppress the rebellion. The death squads and terror mechanisms used by the Salvadoran government, and propertied elite, were in a manner legitimized by similar repressive methods used to suppress Farabundo Martí in his 1932 uprising.<sup>11</sup>

The state sponsored terrorism and repression experienced by El Salvador, while appearing as wanton madness and killing sprees by rogue remnants of a responsible government, were actually systematic killings, with highly accurate intelligence and targeting. “During the 1960s, as part of an increasing hemisphere-wide concern over communist-sponsored revolution led by U.S. programs and ideology, El Salvador developed sophisticated state-security and

intelligence agencies that later facilitated the successful practice of massive state terror.”<sup>12</sup> One such agency was ORDEN, a secret paramilitary intelligence organization. “By the 1970s, El Salvador had state intelligence and repressive capacities that might have seemed beyond any reasonable calculus of need, even considering the possibility of war with its neighbors. Indeed, the state was prepared and predisposed to confront an enemy that did not yet exist.”<sup>13</sup>

Once the Junta de Gobierno Revolucionario (JGR) took over in 1979, it disbanded ORDEN, but the agency continued to operate on its own, clandestinely supplying intelligence to the right wing death squads. During the five years following the coup, the JGR provided a military mechanism which engaged in over 40,000 political killings and nearly 4,000 disappearances.<sup>14</sup> José Napoleón Duarte’s presidential win in 1984 failed to stop the violence.<sup>15</sup> It is estimated that, “62,000 people died between October 1979 and April 1987, most of whom were civilian non-combatants murdered by death squads and government security forces.”<sup>16</sup> Other sources claim that more than 75,000 were murdered during the same timeframe, also agreeing that most were non-combatants.<sup>17</sup>

José Duarte led El Salvador until 1989 when Alfredo Cristiani took power. Cristiani could not stop the war either, as evidenced by a strong FMLN surge that created havoc in the capital city, San Salvador, in November 1989.<sup>18</sup> In 1990, the United Nations helped to establish a peace agreement between the belligerents, “The Chapultepec Peace Accords,” and by 1992 the civil war had ended. The result was political acceptance of FMLN as a legitimate political party in the Salvadoran government, but neither side had won its expected victory, even though the violence had ceased. The following table is a condensed political timeline of the events in El Salvador from 1980 to 1992. (See Appendix A for map of Central America and Appendix B for an historical timeline relating to the crisis).

## Political Timeline

Romero ousted in coup. Civil war ensues. 1 <sup>st</sup> Junta Gobierno Revolucionario (JGR) seizes control.	October, 1979
1 <sup>st</sup> Junta fails. José Napoleón Duarte returns and forms a second junta. Begins negotiations with United States.	January 1980
Propertied elite form new political organization ARENA under ret. Maj Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta as a new means of protection.	1981
Elections held to form a provisional government. Maj D'Aubuisson elected president, but under U.S. pressure due to death squad association does not assume presidency. Alvaro Magaña assumes presidency.	1982
New Constitution written.	December 1983
José Napoleón Duarte elected president.	1984
ARENA candidate Alfredo Cristiani wins presidency.	1989
United Nations-mediated peace negotiations begin.	Spring 1990
Peace agreement between FMLN and Salvadoran Government marks the end of Civil War.	1992

*Source:* *Source:* Encyclopedia Britannica Online, S.V. "El Salvador: Civil War."  
<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-40915> (accessed February 17, 2009).

## The Hobbes Covenant

In his article, "The Hobbesian Notion of Self-Preservation Concerning Human Behavior during an Insurgency," author Raymond Millen analyzes the Hobbes purported Leviathan as it relates to insurgency. Thomas Hobbes was a philosopher who pioneered the theory of a "covenant" between a state and its people in the formation of societies based on the idea that violence is a natural human condition. While several other theories of social contract have emerged since Hobbes first offered his idea, the case of El Salvador provides remarkable evidence to Hobbes' original theory that a society is based on collective security, and that the security provided by the state comprises the "covenant" in return for loyalty to the state.<sup>19</sup>

Millen suggests that, while some exist who passionately disagree with the policies of any particular state, one cannot simply ignite a popular uprising unless a breakdown of the state has occurred.<sup>20</sup> In the case of El Salvador, the 1970s provided ample opportunity for the FMLN to garner popular support against the increasingly repressive regime. Fueled by post-WWII communist ideals, the writings of Marx and Lenin, as well as Sandinista military and economic support, the FMLN established control in the countryside among the peasant population and professed to, "fight this war in the name of the poor."<sup>21</sup>

"Each rebel army, of the 5,000 to 10,000 total [members], controlled its own territory and ran a network of peasants, student, and union organizations that demonstrated in the streets, collected weapons, and clandestinely provided cover for guerrilla operations from cells around the country."<sup>22</sup> FMLN's military was able to sever the Salvadoran government's ability to provide basic security by specifically targeting economic, government, and occasionally military targets within the country.<sup>23</sup> In El Salvador, the FMLN used whatever means available to delegitimize the Salvadoran government in the eyes of the peasant populace and advanced the perception that the government was failing in its duties to protect the people.

According to Millen's analysis, most civilian bystanders remain non-committal to either side during an insurgency, hoping to side with the victor.<sup>24</sup> The physical asymmetry between the two belligerents initially prohibits conventional combat and logically forces the insurgent to hide among the population.<sup>25</sup> The population then becomes the battlefield. The insurgent must control the population, and in achieving both territorial control and negating state action, he has in his arsenal of tactics, "assassination, murder, intimidation, and kidnappings."<sup>26</sup> Once local control is achieved, the insurgent then bullies civilians into his cause in order to bolster his ranks.

The citizen can flee to become a refugee, join the insurgent ranks, or accept the insurgent's demands for support, all the while risking death at the hands of the insurgent. Under these circumstances, the citizen of a state becomes disillusioned as to the effectiveness of his or her own government's ability to provide physical security and thus becomes wary of both insurgent and state alike. By remaining at home, the civilian may become a suspected supporter of the insurgent, and falls into a dilemma produced by the civil conflict.

"El Mozote," a guerrilla stronghold pressed by El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) during the war, illustrates a case in point. Of "El Mozote," William Stanley in *The Protection Racket State* writes, "143 skeletons were uncovered in 1992, 85% of which belonged to children aged 12 and under. It is thought that several hundred other people were killed in El Mozote and surrounding communities. Most of them were *not* loyal to the FMLN and had made the terrible mistake of not fleeing from the army."<sup>27</sup>

Millen argues that what is equally disturbing to the citizen's perception of the state breaking the "covenant" is the government's "notion that the citizen is still loyal."<sup>28</sup> The government thinks the citizen will both resist the insurgent and has a free choice regarding loyalty, but somehow disregards the citizen's natural desire for self-preservation.<sup>29</sup> It is logical then, that the military and security arms of the government become cynical trying to determine who is an insurgent, who is a supporter of the insurgent, and who is not involved altogether. While it does not justify violence in counterinsurgency, the premise of disloyal citizens illustrates a perception that supports the issue in El Salvador. The government's response to the insurgency was harsh since it felt disenchanted that citizens had taken up arms against it, and had violated, through illegal violence, the "covenant" on which the state was dependant.

Under the Hobbes construct, a violation of the “covenant” is one theory that explains excessive violence by the state in the conduct of its civil war. In El Salvador, there was no tolerance for demonstrations against the government. Each demonstration or labor strike caused a government reaction resulting in the loss of dozens of supporters and key leaders. The repressive reaction by security forces ultimately led to smaller demonstrations and made it difficult for outward identification with leftist organizations.<sup>30</sup> The repressive measures by the El Salvador government in actuality, however, caused a fundamental shift in FMLN policy that favored other military options and clandestine operations.<sup>31</sup> FMLN tactics necessarily turned towards guerrilla warfare.

### **Barbarism, Indiscriminate Violence, Intimacy**

*They made me watch when they tied his thumbs behind him with barbed wire and made the wire tighter and tighter until his thumbs turned purple. They made me watch when they put a rope through his hands tied like that, threw the other end over the rafters, and then lifted him up and let him hang there, slowly turning, with all the weight of his body hanging from his blue thumbs. And they made me watch when they tore his clothes off and tied a bucket to his genitals, and every half an hour they'd come back and into the bucket they would put one more small stone. -Interview of Salvadoran Mother<sup>32</sup>*

It appears insufficient to kill an individual during conflict, but rather more effective to inflict a devastating psychological impact on witnesses, lest they take up arms themselves. The quote by the Salvadoran mother is merely one example of inhumanity during the Salvadoran conflict. Lawlessness and disorder allow barbarism to take place, but when individuals cast away their humanity to make a point, something else is in play. Barbarism, indiscriminate violence, and intimacy are examined as aspects of civil war that explain, in part, why such acts occur and why such acts may have occurred in El Salvador.

Stathis Kalyvas, in his work *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, explains that, “Although civil wars are not necessarily the most barbaric ones, many civil wars are barbaric at least in that

they target primarily civilians, bucking prevailing or emerging international norms.”<sup>33</sup>

Barbarism is consequently seen during civil conflict for a variety of reasons. The breakdown of the state into a “Hobbesian playground” allows for brutalization of civilians, rampant revenge for unanswered wrongs, the “security dilemma,” which stipulates kill first or be killed, and a general reversion to medieval acts.<sup>34</sup>

A compelling argument that supports the government’s barbaric reaction to violence in El Salvador is one of transgression. Kalyvas remarks that, “Insofar as war is normatively understood to be the exclusive preserve of sovereign actors, organized violence by non-sovereign actors is seen as illegitimate and transgressive. Hence, subjects and citizens who disregard the sharply drawn distinction between sovereign and non-sovereign actors are not legitimate belligerents, but criminals who cannot expect the treatment accorded to legitimate belligerents.”<sup>35</sup> The transgression argument offers one explanation why the Armed Forces of El Salvador (ESAF) violated the Geneva Conventions through the use of torture mechanisms and also helps shed light on the government’s overwhelming repression in trying to achieve its strategic objectives vis-à-vis the FMLN.

*One night I went to the city morgue following the police raid of a rebel safe house. More than twenty bodies were heaped together behind the morgue; a handful of women in the pile had their panties and stockings rolled down to their knees. I didn’t understand it at the time, but the death squads were accomplishing their task: destroying the rebel urban and (to a lesser extent) rural popular base, and terrorizing everyone else. -Clifford Krauss, former Wall Street Journal Correspondent<sup>36</sup>*

Indiscriminate violence in counter-insurgency is common. The death squads in El Salvador relentlessly scoured the urban and rural areas with the intent of eliminating the popular base and undermining the FMLN. Under the Hobbes construct, indiscriminate violence does nothing more than further disenfranchise the population from the state. “When it [the state] uses



force indiscriminately, resulting in high civilian casualties and property damage, it represents a double betrayal.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Kalyvas, though, there is logic in indiscriminate violence by the state, not merely as an act of vengeance toward a particular group. A state will engage in indiscriminate violence when it lacks sufficient resources to properly gain information relating to specific individuals, or it will engage in this type of violence in an effort to “shape civilian behavior indirectly through association,” as evidenced by the massacre at Morazán in 1981.<sup>38</sup>

“Apparently, the use of collective punishment was less evident in marginal urban areas, where victims were identified individually more often than in the countryside.”<sup>39</sup> Kalyvas does point out that indiscriminate violence is counter-productive though, and that a shift will occur to a more selective type of violence over time.

*A little girl is crying . . . “They’re burning my dress. They’re burning my dress.” Nine villagers, one a fifteen year old boy, are herded into one of the houses. Their thumbs are tied behind their backs. Acid is thrown into each face. Their screams are terrifying. Then they are marched through the smoke, through the tears, through the screams of their mothers and wives to a place just outside the village where the soldiers execute them with machetes. -Oxfam America excerpt<sup>40</sup>*

Kalyvas describes intimacy as intrinsic in civil war. “Whereas in interstate wars, physical proximity and ease of aggression tend to be inversely related, violence in civil war is frequently exercised among people who share membership in a legally recognized or “imagined” community (a sovereign unit or a nation) and/or everyday ties of social and spatial interaction, such as neighborhood, friendship, kinship, even family.”<sup>41</sup> To the extent that violence in El Salvador was of an intimate nature, certainly some of the perpetrators had to have familiarity with the communities in which devastation was laid. Kalyvas goes on to further explain a theory of social denunciation, in which certain members of society shun neighbors, relatives, or friends as a means to enact personal grievances within a context of lawlessness.

El Salvador illustrated all three characteristics of violence just discussed. While the killings were indeed executed by both uniformed military forces and death squads, Lauria-Santiago claims, "The common image of mysterious and independent death squads, free-lancing violently on behalf of the status quo, is misleading. In fact, uniformed members of the Salvadoran army carried out the overwhelming majority of the killings."<sup>42</sup> An examination of El Salvador's state apparatus as it existed in the early 1980s and contributed to repression rather than adequately appeasing the grievances which underlay the conflict demonstrates that the Salvadoran civilian government lacked complete control of the military.

### No Control

*The night of the [1979] coup, the conspirators released a proclamation that denounced the "ancestral privileges" of the "dominant classes" and promised "an equitable distribution of national wealth" by reforming agriculture, the tax system, social services, and labor laws. An end to repression would be achieved by dismantling ORDEN, combating "extremist organizations that violate Human Rights," restructuring the security forces, prosecuting human rights violators, and reforming the judiciary. The armed forces would create "a propitious climate for the holding of genuinely free elections within a reasonable timeframe."<sup>43</sup>*

The "almost" bloodless coup that removed Romero from power came from an unlikely source, the military itself in the form of junior officers, who massed thousands of military personnel in order to achieve the ouster.<sup>44</sup> After releasing a proclamation that promised reform and hope for a half-century of repression, why then the next 12 years of horrific violence, apart from the psychology already discussed? William Stanley argues that, "The increased violence in the wake of the coup stemmed indirectly from the very strength of the reform movement: the reformists' agenda constituted a challenge to the interests of ambitious senior officers and to the privileges and impunity of the state security apparatus."<sup>45</sup> In the ensuing years after the coup, the struggle in El Salvador was as much within the government itself as it was without.

Senior military hardliners sided with conservative civilians willing to finance state terror in support of the status quo and their own interests, forced reformist civilian officials to resign, and used violence to target would be reformist supporters on a grand scale.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, “the core of the reform movement was made up of young, politically inexperienced officers who were easily subordinated, intimidated, outmaneuvered, and conned by their superiors.”<sup>47</sup> “A troika of hard-liners – Defense Minister Colonel José Guillermo García, Deputy Defense Minister Colonel Nicolás Carranza, and Colonel Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, the National Guard commander – blocked many of the junta’s goals, including investigations into corrupt and violent military activities.”<sup>48</sup>

On March 24, 1980, the highly publicized assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero prompted action by Colonel Majano, “the most liberal member of the junta,” and led to the arrest of death squad guru D’Aubuisson.<sup>49</sup> But, “Majano waived, as a military judge dropped the charges against all officers, and the high command transferred all his allies from key command positions.”<sup>50</sup> As the “center of gravity” for the whole of government became more clandestine, “there no longer appeared to be a single central point of political power or authority.”<sup>51</sup>

The second junta (1980), headed by Christian Democratic Party (PDC) leader José Napoleón Duarte, had a little more authority than the previous junta simply because it had the backing of the United States government.<sup>52</sup> “Now, since a significant portion of the Christian Democratic leadership and most of its mass base were too left-wing and anti-oligarchic to be suitable partners in government, the [military] high command and security forces both had strong incentives to use their capacity for violence to “domesticate” the PDC, suppressing its mass base and leaving only the elite level as a facade.”<sup>53</sup> This continuing political struggle within the

government illustrated a central theme throughout the entire conflict that contributed to the prolonged violence in El Salvador, which was the inability to control the military aspect of national power. The war was not simply a counterinsurgency due to communist expansion; it was also an institutional war to change the foundation of the government.

### **The United States in El Salvador**

U.S. involvement in El Salvador was a necessary response to potential communist expansion in the Western hemisphere, ideological in nature, yet tempered by the exhausting experience from Vietnam. On the whole, the strategic objective was to prevent Soviet influence in a region that held vital interests for the United States. President Reagan's "Secretary of State Alexander Haig said the administration 'would draw the line' on Soviet expansion in El Salvador, even if that meant taking military action against Cuba—'going to the source,' as he put it, of the arms shipments to the FMLN guerrillas."<sup>54</sup> The FMLN represented the potential danger America sought to avoid and pre-empted a response from the U.S. government. "Thomas Enders, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, described the administration's vision of El Salvador this way: 'If, after Nicaragua, El Salvador is captured by a violent minority, what state in Central America will be able to resist, how long would it be before the major strategic U.S. interests—the [Panama] canal, sea lanes, oil supplies—were at risk?'"<sup>55</sup>

Initially, human rights did not appear high on the Reagan administration's list of priorities in view of the Cold War. According to Stanley, "The strategy of mass murder [by ESAF] enjoyed the tacit support of the highest levels of the U.S. government,"<sup>56</sup> The administration in Washington, D.C. demonstrated a non-confrontational attitude for fear of upsetting the already fragile government and was constantly reminded by top Salvadoran

officials that, "pursuing human rights too vigorously could destabilize the institution and lead to a rightist coup."<sup>57</sup>

Archbishop Romero's murder and, eight months later on November 2, 1980, the rape and murder of three American church nuns and one female lay volunteer sparked outcry within the United States for more vigilance and action towards human rights in El Salvador.<sup>58</sup> Clifford Krauss from *Inside Central America* writes that, "The initial Reagan administration disregard for human rights unleashed a backlash that the administration ultimately had to accommodate. Fueled by the killings of Romero and the American church-women, churches across the United States mobilized against the war."<sup>59</sup> In an effort to avoid another Vietnam experience, America had now found itself implicitly supporting a regime known for murder and war crimes in an effort to achieve national security objectives. Strategy overshadowed criminality and had the effect of eliciting acceptance of the Salvadoran regime, until the American public learned of the killings.

Tactically, "The Reagan administration approached the crisis in El Salvador as a military problem from the outset."<sup>60</sup> "By the end of 1981, the basis for the Military Group (MILGROUP) security assistance program was in place. Working within the 55 trainer limit, ESAF was expanded over time from 11,000 to 56,000. The guiding principle could be explained as KISSSS, Keep it simple, sustainable, small, and Salvadoran."<sup>61</sup> The MILGROUP was a set of military advisors supplied to El Salvador from 1981 until the conclusion of hostilities in 1991, under the command of General Fred E. Woerner, in order to train the ESAF and develop a national strategy to defeat the insurgency. Woerner's advice was for the army to take action immediately, using small-unit tactics, in order to take the fight to the FMLN and deny them any possibility of having a rear area.<sup>62</sup>

The United States Army, the source for MILGROUP advisors in El Salvador, had already grasped the problem posed by the insurgency. In their field manual 90-8, *Counter Guerrilla Operations*, the Army accurately reflected in 1986 the pre-requisites for an insurgency: vulnerable population, leadership available for direction, and lack of government control.<sup>63</sup> El Salvador provided a ripe environment for this understanding.

The MILGROUP security assistance program under General Woerner sought to change the very fabric of the military organization in its training, which proved a “most difficult task.”<sup>64</sup> “The goals for professionalization—not different from those required elsewhere in the developing world—were an ESAF that (1) subordinated itself to civilian authority, (2) respected human rights, and (3) institutionally changed ‘so that talent was nurtured, success was rewarded, incompetents were weeded out, and the officer corps in general became operationally effective.’”<sup>65</sup> But, the Salvadoran army refused to accept the advice from the United States Army, whose doctrine described counter-guerrilla operations at its core, albeit mainly from a military perspective. William Stanley writes, “Although the high command was willing to kill large numbers of civilians, it was not, in fact, very aggressive in fighting the war. Military units stayed close to their barracks, and there were few offensive operations in guerrilla-held areas.”<sup>66</sup>

The death squads operated by Roberto D’Aubuisson and others were not helping the situation either. In FM 90-8, United States Army doctrine addressed the importance of the population. “The government must win back the support of the people. It does this through providing them security and showing an honest effort to correct those conditions which caused dissatisfaction.”<sup>67</sup> Vice President George H.W. Bush, on a visit to San Salvador, delivered a message to then President Magaña, “Every murderous act [the death squads] commit poisons the well of friendship between our two countries and advances the cause of those who would impose

an alien dictatorship on the people of El Salvador. These cowardly death-squad terrorists are just as repugnant to me, to President Reagan, to the U.S. Congress, and to the American people as the terrorists of the left.”<sup>68</sup>

From his work, *Killer Elite*, author Michael Smith states, “The right-wing death squads were increasing the feeling of repression and in reality were the terrorists’ greatest ally. They needed to be eradicated, not supported as some in the Reagan administration suggested. They were part of the problem, not part of the solution.”<sup>69</sup> One U.S. State Department official quoted by William Stanley claimed in 1989, “The violence [in the early 1980s] was motivated by fear of losing, by the rapid acceleration of violence by the left, by the risk of complete chaos. The repression was excessive at times, in terms of tortures, etc. But it’s probably a good thing that it happened. It saved the country from communism. I have no problem with the idea of identifying your enemy and going out and killing him.”<sup>70</sup>

The United States fought hard to reduce the heinous acts of death squads in El Salvador. Using military aid and economic resources as a bargaining tool, the U.S. threatened to decline aid to the Salvadoran government unless the death squads ceased in their activities. Ironically, however, Stanley’s research uncovered that, “Death squad killings fell in 1984, but the military compensated for reductions in targeted killings by increasing its indiscriminate violence in rural areas, both through attacks on communities thought to be FMLN supporters and through increased aerial bombardment of FMLN areas.”<sup>71</sup> The acts of the death squads, the attitudes of American leadership and its people, and written doctrine that denounce repression, provide strong evidence that United States policy can not encourage such acts in the achievement of its national objectives.

## **Not Just the Insurgents**

The United States was confused in El Salvador. The insurgent movement, FMLN, was the enemy, but so was the Salvadoran government's military high command. The unfortunate conundrum that the United States encountered was supporting the very structure that undermined basic counterinsurgency operations.

The U.S. Army's and Marine Corps' current counterinsurgency doctrinal publication explains that, "In Western liberal tradition, a government that derives its just powers from the people and responds to their desires while looking out for their welfare is accepted as legitimate."<sup>72</sup> The Salvadoran government had maintained power through repression for fifty years by the time of Romero's ouster, but the events in the immediate aftermath of the coup illustrated the degree to which that government had lost its legitimacy, yet grappled to regain it. The young officers of the coup in 1979 showed promise for legitimacy, but were too junior and inexperienced to contest the military colonels. Duarte brought the promise of reforms backed by the United States, but the military high command simply undermined his political support via terror.

The civil war in El Salvador lasted until 1992. The last large offensive by FMLN occurred on November 11, 1989 when, "Some 1,500 FMLN guerrillas ducked army patrols and infiltrated San Salvador ... declaring this to be the final counteroffensive and the final chapter of fifty years of war."<sup>73</sup> By this time in the war, eight years under Duarte, replaced by Cristiani in March, 1989, had forged weak U.S.-financed structures and institutions. "Despite almost a decade of work [by MILGROUP advisors], the surprise attack exposed a failure of the ESAF intelligence in predicting the attack, the ESAF ineffectiveness in responding to the attacks, and the continued abuse of human rights by ESAF units."<sup>74</sup>



The Salvadoran response to this offensive was merely a step backward. "The high command, afraid that units might crack under the pressure, relied on the air force to strafe and rocket the barrios of San Salvador—a tactic that killed or wounded innocent civilians and spurred a human rights outcry around the world."<sup>75</sup> Salvadoran police and security personnel began raiding churches, union buildings, and human rights organizations.<sup>76</sup> What little political gains FMLN had earned over the previous decade had in one final offensive been erased.

Ultimately the Government of El Salvador and FMLN signed a peace agreement, enforced by the United Nations Observation Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) under a coalition of police forces from Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Guyana, India, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Venezuela.<sup>77</sup> "The agreements involved a ceasefire and related measures, reform and reduction of the armed forces, creation of a new police force, reform of the judicial and electoral systems, human rights, land tenure and other economic and social issues."<sup>78</sup> ONUSAL remained in El Salvador until 1995.

### **Conclusion**

The United States has had significant history in counterinsurgency operations, a fact that has come to light since operations began in Iraq and Afghanistan present day. The past indeed sheds light on the future and uncovers knowledge that should be remembered as nuggets for success in a counterinsurgency fight. One insight is that the people of a country represent the battleground for both the insurgents and counterinsurgents alike. El Salvador is replete with examples of how a domestic government may tend toward repression in its efforts to fight the insurrection rather than address the grievances for which conflict exists.

As early as 1931, the American military knew the potential for civil disaster in El Salvador. Clifford Krauss cites the U.S. military attaché to Central America's description of the

problem a year before the Farabundo Martí uprising. "About the first thing one observes when he goes to San Salvador is the number of expensive automobiles on the streets. There seems to be nothing but Packards and Pierce Arrows about. There appears to be nothing between these high priced cars and the oxcart with its barefooted attendant. There is practically no middle class between the very rich and the very poor. . . . A socialistic or communistic revolution in El Salvador may be delayed for several years, ten or even twenty, but when it comes it will be a bloody one."<sup>79</sup>

Part of the problem the United States encountered in El Salvador was a failure to recognize the disconnection between the ESAF and the Salvadoran government. MILGROUP advisors who sought to properly teach counterinsurgency tactics to the military were prohibited from taking part in the operations. This prohibition gave ESAF the latitude to continue its abuses without adequate observation by U.S. Army members who might have been able to report or even stop the violence. Perhaps in hindsight, the United States should have committed troops to observe operations, but on the heels of the Vietnam experience, America's public was wary of any involvement in a popular war.

One failure of the Salvadoran Armed Forces was to secure the population. General Woerner's comments in an interview with William Stanley were, "They had two men on every bridge in the country. This was not security, it was a renewable arms supply for the guerrillas."<sup>80</sup> Without a willingness to remain in the countryside, to set up defensive positions that would force the FMLN to fight ESAF on ESAF's own terms, and to sever the population as a potential supporter of the FMLN, the result was a guerrilla war that could have lasted even longer than the period of this particular conflict. Furthermore, ESAF operations were typically responsive to attacks rather than pre-emptive. In their response, without adequate intelligence in rural areas,

ESAF easily resorted to repressive measures not noticed except by human rights groups and the press.

In his book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, author Robert Thompson describes insurgency and its aims. "An insurgent movement is a war for the people. It stands to reason that government measures must be directed to restoring government authority and law and order throughout the country, so that control over the population can be regained and its support won. This cannot be done unless a high priority is given to the administrative structure of government itself, to its institutions and to the training of its personnel. Without a reasonably efficient government machine, no programmes or projects, in the context of counter-insurgency, will produce the desired results."<sup>81</sup>

The Salvadoran experience demonstrated a complete failure of the domestic government in its understanding of counterinsurgency. Furthermore, it also demonstrated a certain lack of understanding by the superpower supporting the regime which committed the atrocities. A key lesson which must come from this conflict is that of Thompson's comments regarding the insurgent movement, for without the support of the people, the insurgent cannot effectively further his cause. But a government can certainly worsen its stance by failing to understand that the people form the grassroots support of the insurgent and state alike. Killing them in the ways ESAF and the death squads did only worsened the issue and left a bloody scar in the annals of Salvadoran history that may never heal.

This paper has also examined theories for excessive violence in a civil or popular war context as explanations for increased violence. The case of El Salvador from 1980 until 1992 demonstrates validity for those theories as its experience seems to fit the mold well. Likewise, the theories help to explain the brutal nature of El Salvador's civil war. But the reality is that this

is only one case study where increased repression is a symptom of one particular historical background which gave rise to and even seemed to accelerate violence by both the insurgents and the domestic government in the early part of the Salvadoran crisis.

Members of the United States armed forces who are charged with the conduct of warfare need to remain cognizant of the potential for atrocities. Just because the United States disdains the acts does not mean that the conditions will not precipitate them. El Salvador demonstrates that understanding the conditions which give rise to barbaric and unlawful behavior will help military members and advisors better prepare for the means to intervene. Unfortunately for El Salvador, unlike Iraq or Afghanistan today, the Cold War strategy employed by the United States compelled a quasi-acceptance of human rights abuses as yet another means to combat communism.

## Appendix A

### Map of Central America



Source: <http://www.sitesatlas.com/Maps/Maps/304.gif>.

## Appendix B

### Expanded Political Timeline

Spanish conquest and colonization of El Salvador by Pedro de Alvarado.	1524-1525
Meléndez and Quiñónez, coffee baron families, monopolize the office of the president.	1913-1927
Military coup overthrows coffee baron families and instills Gen. Maximiliano Hernández as president. Begins 50 year succession of military governments.	1931
2 day farmworker revolt led by Augustín Farbundo Martí for whom FMLN is named. President Martínez summarily executes 10,000 suspected participants.	1932
José Napoleón Duarte exiled to Venezuela after loss of rigged elections.	1972
General Carlos Humberto Romero tenure as president. Increased demonstrations, strikes, and human rights abuses.	1977-1979
Romero ousted in coup. Civil war ensues. 1 <sup>st</sup> Junta Gobierno Revolucionario (JGR) seizes control.	October, 1979
1 <sup>st</sup> Junta fails. José Napoleón Duarte returns and forms a second junta. Begins negotiations with United States.	January 1980
Propertied elite form new political organization ARENA under ret. Maj Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta as a new means of protection.	1981
Elections held to form a provisional government. Maj D'Aubuisson elected president, but under U.S. pressure due to death squad association does not assume presidency. Alvaro Magaña assumes presidency.	1982
New Constitution written.	December 1983
José Napoleón Duarte elected president.	1984
ARENA candidate Alfredo Cristiani wins presidency.	1989
United Nations-mediated peace negotiations begin.	Spring 1990
Peace agreement between FMLN and Salvadoran Government marks the end of Civil War.	1992

*Source:* Encyclopedia Britannica Online, S.V. "El Salvador: Civil War."  
<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-40915> (accessed February 17, 2009).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7 as quoted from Ernesto Che Guevarra, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 75-6.
- <sup>2</sup> Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 20.
- <sup>3</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 479.
- <sup>4</sup> Raymond Millen, "The Hobbesian Notion of Self-Preservation Concerning Human Behavior During an Insurgency," *Parameters* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2006/2007): 4-5, <http://www.proquest.com/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Bard E. O'Neill, 155.
- <sup>6</sup> Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, "A Strategic View of Insurgencies: Insights from El Salvador," *McNair Papers Number Eight* (Washington, DC: The Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, May 1990), 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert J. Coates, "The United States' Approach to El Salvador" (National Security Paper, Marine Corps University, 1991), 2-3.
- <sup>8</sup> Manwaring and Prisk, 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 205.
- <sup>10</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Online, S.V. "El Salvador: Civil War." <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-40915> (accessed February 17, 2009).
- <sup>11</sup> Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, "The Culture and Politics of State Terror and Repression in El Salvador," in *When States Kill: Latin America, The U.S., and Technologies of Terror*, Eds. Cecilia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez, 85-114 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 90-91.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 97.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 94.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 96.
- <sup>15</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Online, S.V. "El Salvador: Civil War." <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-40915> (accessed January 18, 2009).
- <sup>16</sup> Encyclopedia of the Nations, "El Salvador History." <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Americas/El-Salvador-HISTORY.html> (accessed January 18, 2009).
- <sup>17</sup> Clifford Krauss, *Inside Central America: Its People, Politics, and History* (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1991), 55 and Encyclopedia Britannica Online, S.V. "El Salvador: Civil War." <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-40915> (accessed January 18, 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Online, S.V. "El Salvador: Civil War." <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-40915> (accessed January 18, 2009).
- <sup>19</sup> Raymond Millen, 4-5.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2.
- <sup>21</sup> Clifford Krauss, 55.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, 205.
- <sup>24</sup> Raymond Millen, 5.
- <sup>25</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006) 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Raymond Millen, 6.
- <sup>27</sup> William D. Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996), 225.
- <sup>28</sup> Raymond Millen, 9.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> William D. Stanley, 179.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Gary E. McCuen, *Political Murder in Central America: Death Squads & U.S. Policies* (Hudson, WI: Gary E. McCuen Publications Inc., 1985), 15, quoted from *The Progressive*, March, 1983, 43.
- <sup>33</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, 55.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, 55-62.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 62.
- <sup>36</sup> Clifford Krauss, 76.

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- <sup>37</sup> Raymond Millen, 7.
- <sup>38</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, 148-150.
- <sup>39</sup> Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, 101.
- <sup>40</sup> Gary E. McCuen, 13, excerpted from an Oxfam America public position paper, 1984.
- <sup>41</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, 333.
- <sup>42</sup> Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, 99.
- <sup>43</sup> William D. Stanley, 134.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 133.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 136.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, 136-7.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 137.
- <sup>48</sup> Clifford Krauss, 71.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, 74-75.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, 75.
- <sup>51</sup> Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, 95.
- <sup>52</sup> William D. Stanley, 184.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Clifford Krauss, 82.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> William D. Stanley, 221.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Clifford Krauss, 81.
- <sup>59</sup> Clifford Krauss, 82.
- <sup>60</sup> William D. Stanley, 226.
- <sup>61</sup> Robert D. Ramsey III, "Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador," *Global War on Terror Occasional Paper 18* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 85.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Counter Guerrilla Operations*, FM 90-8 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, August 29, 1986), 1-2.
- <sup>64</sup> Robert D. Ramsey III, 85.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid, as quoted from Bacevich, 24-25.
- <sup>66</sup> William D. Stanley, 226.
- <sup>67</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Counter Guerrilla Operations*, FM 90-8 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, August 29, 1986), 1-4.
- <sup>68</sup> Clifford Krauss, 85.
- <sup>69</sup> Michael Smith, *Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2006) 50.
- <sup>70</sup> William D. Stanley, 220.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, 229.
- <sup>72</sup> Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, December 15, 2006), 1-21.
- <sup>73</sup> Clifford Krauss, 105.
- <sup>74</sup> Robert D. Ramsey III, 87.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>76</sup> Clifford Krauss, 106.
- <sup>77</sup> UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL July 1991-April 1995), "Facts and Figures," [http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co\\_mission/onusalfacts.html](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/onusalfacts.html).
- <sup>78</sup> UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL July 1991-April 1995), "Mandate," [http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co\\_mission/onusalmandate.html](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/onusalmandate.html).
- <sup>79</sup> Clifford Krauss, 59.
- <sup>80</sup> William Stanley, 227.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid, 52.



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